

Pakistan: When Gen. Zia imposed Arabic

Monday 7 March 2011, by [ASHRAF Masood](#) (Date first published: 4 March 2011).

The introduction of Arabic as a second language in Pakistani schools concretized Pakistani identity as inherently Islamic and restructured our desires in Islamist terms.

The role of national languages in defining and articulating national identities is a hackneyed subject, but, somehow, the privileging of learning a sacred language has not been explored much in the debates on nationalism. In this brief article, I intend to draw attention to the rise of Arabic studies in Pakistan and its long-term consequences for the Pakistani public sphere.

In his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson provides three major causes for the waning of the pre-national empires and the rise of modern nation-states. One of the reasons, according to Anderson, was the rise of vernacular languages in place of what were considered the sacred languages, Latin and Arabic included. I have long maintained that Anderson misses the point as he only looks at the official use of these languages and not about the symbolic aspects of their power. In case of Arabic, for example, while it never was the official language of Muslim India, it still remains a language that wields immense symbolic power.

In fact, this symbolic power never really recedes and actually comes to haunt and shape the politics of Pakistan in the mid nineteen seventies. Those of us who are old enough to remember it probably know that until the mid-seventies, most of the government schools offered Persian as a second language. There were quite a few reasons for it: Persian, having been the lingua franca of the Mughal court, had been the language of Muslim administration of Northern India for quite some time; Persian was also a mother language for Urdu language and Urdu poetry and prose; Persian was also a language that, at least, impacted the border regions of both Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and, most importantly, Persian was the language of our close RCD ally, Iran.

In the mid seventies as the Shah of Iran was deposed, the Saudis emerged as the leading powerbrokers in the Islamic world. One aspect of their deep investment into Pakistani culture was the replacement of Persian as a second language with Arabic. This shift also suited Zia-ul-Haq who was using Islamization as a legitimating strategy for his power. We could have not guessed it then but this choice of a second “sacred” language has had long-term, negative consequences in defining Pakistani nationhood.

When we learned Persian as a second language, we learned it as language of poetry with a deep awareness of its place in the Pakistani secular sphere; we never associated it with religion as it was not considered a sacred language, not even by our Shia brothers or sisters who, despite their affiliations with Iran, still considered Arabic the primary sacred language. Persian as a language of high culture had the capacity to structure our desires about a larger culture of art without much emphasis on religious sentiment. How many of us can very easily recall names of Persian poets: Hafiz, Saadi, Khayyam, Attar, Rumi. Now, try recalling the names of Arab poets: I am drawing a blank (This is not to imply Arab literature is not rich). The introduction of Arabic as a second language in Pakistani schools concretized Pakistani identity as inherently Islamic and restructured our desires in Islamist terms. This language learning was no longer about its utility as a language of

commerce or secular culture: its single utility was as that of the sacred language, as the language of the Qur'an. Our flirtation with Arabic, therefore, was deeply religious just as it was for those who experienced it every day in reading the Qur'an or listening to the Arabic calls for prayer. Now there is nothing wrong with this experience, for Pakistan, after all, is a predominantly Muslim country. But introducing Arabic as a second language in our schools also caused two effects: it reasserted a supranational, historical sacred and it structured our perception of the nation in predominantly Muslim terms. Thus, the children from religious minorities, for whom Arabic was not really a sacred language, in a way, could be considered less Pakistani than their Muslim counterparts. Also, as the language was sacred, our expectations of it also became religious for when we learn Arabic in the classroom we do not necessarily go looking for works by Arab authors such as Naguib Mahfouz or Aliffa Riffat. Chances are that by learning Arabic we also learn to direct our attention to the Qur'an as a sacred text but also as the most important text for a Pakistani identity, a practice that was already quite established in the madrassas. With the introduction of Arabic as a second language in our school system, thus, the federally funded school system also, in symbolic terms, became an extension of the madrassas.

Thus, while our students never learn much about the various languages of their own nation, they do learn a language that puts their expectations beyond the nation-state (Saudi Arabia) and structures their loyalty for a glorious past that never really existed but is inherently supranational and idealized. In this way, it seems, in terms of structuring of desires that inform our politics, the introduction of Arabic in our school systems has worked to weaken the teaching of the nation and replaced it with an atavistic and uncritical engagement with those regions of the world that are "sacred" but also represent the most undemocratic and repressive regimes on the planet.

For the postcolonial nations, national languages play an important role in creating a sense of the nation especially through literary artifacts. Sadly, this important role has been deeply contested in case of Urdu by insertion of a foreign and "sacred" language. There is nothing wrong with a post-national politics of a cosmopolitan national identity; in fact I find it extremely important for any nation but especially for Pakistan. But, as Fanon suggests toward the end of *The Wretched of The Earth*, a post-national identity—especially the one invested in the past—cannot precede the creation of a national identity. In case of Pakistan privileging regional languages and enhancing our study of Urdu and Urdu literature would help in reinvesting our desires in the nation instead of aligning our politics and emotions with a mythical Muslim-Arab past.

Dr. Masood Ashraf

P.S.

* From VIEWPOINT ONLINE ISSUE NO. 40, MARCH 4, 2011

:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/when-gen-zia-brought-arabic.html>

* Author of *Constructing Pakistan* (Oxford UP, 2010) Masood Ashraf Raja is an Assistant Professor of Postcolonial Literature and Theory at the University of North Texas, United States and the editor of *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies*. His critical essays have been published in journals including *South Asian Review*, *Digest of Middle East Studies*, *Caribbean Studies*, *Muslim Public Affairs Journal*, and *Mosaic*. He is currently working on his second book, entitled *Secular Fundamentalism: Poetics of Incitement and the Muslim Sacred*.